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Dramatic Publishing

A Full-Length Play

Get Bill Shakespeare
Off
the Stage !



BY

JOSEPH ROBINETTE



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(GET BILL SHAKESPEARE OFF THE STAGE!)

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THE STORY

Fran Caldwell, a young, idealistic drama teacher in her first high school job, announces that this year's major production will be a staged collection of Shakespearian scenes instead of a "light comedy" or "frothy musical" which has been the school's tradition for years. The announcement meets with decided resistance from the students, several parents, and even a school board member whose terse note to the principal warns: "Get Bill Shakespeare off the stage!" A plan to "sabotage" the production is fully realized when the students perform a devastating on-stage spoof of Shakespeare, an action which places Fran's integrity – and employment – in jeopardy. Compromising against her true wishes, and secretly planning to resign at the end of the semester, Fran agrees to direct a "mindless" comedy preferred by the students. As she becomes better acquainted with her young actors, she has second thoughts about leaving. She realizes that her appreciation of the "Bard" can best be taught by finding commonalities between Shakespeare's characters and the students themselves. They, in the meantime, have developed a better understanding of their teacher and even a surprising appreciation for Shakespeare himself. Once again, they go into an "underground" rehearsal but, this time, the result is a tour de force finale which is a tribute to Fran Caldwell and, perhaps, a salute to all high school drama teachers everywhere.

GET BILL SHAKESPEARE OFF THE STAGE!

A Full-Length Play

For Six Men and Ten Women

Fran Caldwell a high school drama teacher
Mrs. Stockton the principal
Ed Summers the basketball coach
Mrs. Fredricks a parent
Mr. Overmire a parent
Sherrie
Donna
Gina
Tony
Joan
Cassie
Tim
Phyllis
Ray
Beth
Mickey
students

PLACE: In and around a typical, contemporary high school.

TIME: The present.

* ACT ONE *

SCENE: A stage in a high school auditorium.

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: The stage is empty. A loud buzzer or bell is heard. Over a loudspeaker a voice intones: "Mr. Collins, please come to the office. Mr. Collins, please come to the office." SHERRIE wanders onto the stage. She drops her books and strolls D C.

SHERRIE (dramatically). Life is a banquet, and most poor people are starving to death.

(DONNA enters.)

DONNA. Sherrie! (They laugh.)

LOUDSPEAKER. Bus four is running late. All students riding bus 524 report to the cafeteria.

SHERRIE. You are going to try out.

DONNA. I wasn't - - but I knew when rehearsals started and you guys were all talking about the show I'd miss it. So - -

(GINA enters.)

GINA. Did I hear Ethel Merman herself out here?

SHERRIE (an arm around GINA). "Your Auntie Mame is going to unlock doors for you. What adventures we're going to have together."

GINA. You were so great in that part.

SHERRIE. I just wish Mr. Norton hadn't cut all the four letter words.

DONNA. What are we going to do without Mr. Norton?

GINA. I miss him already. I can't believe he retired.

(TONY enters.)

TONY. Hi, gang. Is Joan here yet?

DONNA. Haven't seen her, Tony.

TONY. She had a test in Social Studies. Probably hasn't finished.

GINA. Probably doesn't know the answers - - since she went with you to the Dairy Dip last night.

TONY. Boy, you're nosy.

GINA. I was there and saw you, that's all. I was there.

(TIM enters, somewhat reluctantly.)

SHERRIE. Tim! Are you going to try out?

TIM. I guess. I really shouldn't, but - -

SHERRIE. Of course you should. I know how much you wanted to be in the show last year.

(JOAN enters in a flurry, going to TONY.)

JOAN. Tony - - I failed it. I failed it. I failed it!

DONNA. Come on, Joan. You never failed anything in your life.

JOAN. We shouldn't have gone to the Dairy Dip last night.
(GINA giggles.)

TONY. Oh, can it, Gina.

(CASSIE enters.)

CASSIE. Hi, stars of tomorrow. Is she here yet?

JOAN. Who?

CASSIE. Who? Queen Elizabeth, of course. The new drama teacher.

SHERRIE. Not yet, Cassie.

CASSIE. What's her name anyway?

DONNA. Caldwell. I've got her in second period English.

TIM. What's she like?

DONNA. Okay, I guess. She's a little uptight but this is her first teaching job.

CASSIE. I hope she lets us choose the play like Mr. Norton always did.

(PHYLLIS enters.)

PHYLLIS. Hey, everybody. I've got a surprise for you.

SHERRIE. You broke up with Ray.

GINA. That wouldn't be a surprise - - it would be impossible!

TONY (singing). "To dream the impossible dream. To fight the unbeatable foe..." I vote for "La Mancha."

DONNA. Tony, you'd better hope we do a non-musical this year. (ALL laugh.)

TIM. So - - what's the surprise, Phyllis?

PHYLLIS (gesturing toward offstage). Tah-dah!

(RAY saunters in as ALL react with some surprise.)

TONY. Hey, Ray - - you're not going to try out, are you?

RAY. Why not?

TONY. I just thought after last year - -

RAY. Cool it, Tony. I didn't drop outta the show. I got sick, remember?

BETH (offstage, singing). "Hey, look me over, lend me an ear. Fresh out of clover, mortgaged up to here. . ."

DONNA. It's Julie Andrews!

(BETH enters.)

BETH. In the flesh!

RAY. Hey, not bad flesh. Can we see a little more? (ALL laugh.)

BETH. Ray, you're an animal. You know that? (Nuzzling up to him.) Can I join the zoo?

PHYLLIS. Buzz off, Beth. Ray's my animal.

BETH. So - - what show are we going to do?

GINA. "My Fair Lady." I'm perfect for Eliza Doolittle.

TONY. You'd be better as Henry Higgins. (ALL laugh as GINA chases TONY.)

SHERRIE. I don't want to do another musical this year.

DONNA. That's because you've had the lead in every musical since the year one.

SHERRIE. I just think we should do a play for a change. Maybe something serious.

TIM. How about "A Streetcar Named Desire?"

BETH. That's dirty!

DONNA. They'd never let us put that on in a million years.

TONY. Too bad. I'd be a great Stanley Kowalski.

GINA (mocking him). You'd be better as Blanche DuBoise.

(ALL laugh as TONY "chalks one up" for GINA.)

TONY. Touche, mon pussycat.

MRS. STOCKTON (offstage). Right this way, Fran.

BETH. Shh - - here she comes.

(They assemble themselves as an "audience" as MRS. STOCKTON and FRAN CALDWELL enter.)

MRS. STOCKTON. Good afternoon, everyone. (ALL return the greeting.) Well, this is a pretty fair turnout. I'm sure others will show up later. Everybody - - meet our new English teacher and drama director, Miss Fran Caldwell. (ALL applaud and warmly exchange greetings with her.)

FRAN. Thank you, Mrs. Stockton. And thank you all very much for coming to auditions. I know a couple of you already. Donna - - second period lit, right?

DONNA. Right. Hi, Miss Caldwell.

FRAN. And I think I have Tommy in study hall.

TONY. Tony.

FRAN. Tony, I'm sorry. I'll have all your names pretty soon. Now, before we begin, I think Mrs. Stockton has a few words.

MRS. STOCKTON. A couple - - that's all. I just wanted to say that I've given Miss Caldwell complete freedom to run things as she chooses. Mr. Norton was a very . . . popular . . . teacher and most of you liked the way he did things. But I think it would be very unfair of me to impose Mr. Norton's methods on Miss Caldwell - - and I'm sure you agree. (They verbalize agreement.) Fran.

FRAN. Thank you. First - - I'd like to tell you why I've chosen to do our major production in the fall. Things are less hectic now than in May when everything is going on - - especially for you seniors. And I checked the facilities calendar and saw that the auditorium will be used two nights a week next spring for a college extension course.

LOUDSPEAKER. Mrs. Stockton. Please come to the office.

Mrs. Stockton. Please come to the office.

MRS. STOCKTON. Oh, my. Sounds like I'm being called to the principal's office. It's a good thing for me I'm the principal. I'll see you later, Fran.

FRAN. Thanks, Mrs. Stockton. (MRS. STOCKTON exits.)

Now, the second thing - - and much more important to you - - is the choice of the production. I know that Mr.

Norton was leaning toward a comedy called "Court Is Adjourned." In fact, he already ordered the scripts.

TONY. Oh, yeah. We read that in class last year.

GINA. I remember. It was really funny.

FRAN. Uh, yes - - but I've decided not to do a comedy.

CASSIE. You've already picked out the play?

FRAN. Yes. (ALL exchange glances.) I also feel it would be unwise - - in my very first semester - - to try and coordinate a musical. (Some mild opposition is heard.) However - - we'll definitely try to do one next year.

BETH. But I graduate this year.

GINA. Oh, Beth - - you've been in every musical since the ninth grade anyway.

FRAN. Then a change of pace might be just the thing for you - - Beth, is it?

BETH. Yes, ma'am.

FRAN. Besides - - when you get to college, you'll find they do other things besides musicals. Now, in addition to finding a challenging show, I wanted one that could use an unlimited number of people.

GINA. You mean we all get to be in it?

FRAN. That's right. And, in a sense, you'll all have leading roles. (ALL applaud this information.)

SHERRIE. So, what are we doing?

CASSIE. Yeah, tell us.

TONY. What's the play?

FRAN. Shakespeare! (There is a long pause.)

GINA (incredulously). Shakespeare?

BETH. You mean - - William Shakespeare?

FRAN. The Bard of Stratford-on-Avon.

RAY (after a brief pause). So, uh - - which play are we doing?
Not that it matters.

FRAN (taking scripts from her bag or briefcase). Actually - - we're going to do a collection of scenes from Shakespeare - - "Hamlet," "Romeo and Juliet," "McBeth." All of you will have substantial roles, you see - - and we'll call our production "Shakespeare, Tonight."

(MICKEY enters wearing a football uniform.)

MICKEY. Hey, everybody. Sorry I'm late. Excuse me, ma'am. Practice went overtime today.

FRAN. Well - - how nice to see an athlete interested in drama.
MICKEY. Yeah. Mr. Norton cast me as Big Jule in "Guys and Dolls." You know that show?

FRAN (smiling). I've heard of it.

MICKEY (very tough). "I came here to shoot crap. Let's shoot crap." I wasn't bad. Right, Tony? (He slaps TONY on the back.)

TONY (unenthusiastically). You were terrific, Mickey.

MICKEY. Well - - I got hooked after that.

FRAN. The smell of the greasepaint, huh?

MICKEY (smelling his armpits). I'm sorry. I should have taken my shower first.

FRAN. No, no. It's an expression - - "The smell of the greasepaint, the roar of the crowd." That's what "hooks" us theatre people.

MICKEY. Oh, yeah. Right. So - - have we decided what play we're gonna do? (He sits.)

RAY. Yeah.

DONNA. We've decided.

MICKEY. What?

GINA. Shakespeare.

MICKEY (after a beat). I think I'll take that shower after all. Then maybe I'll be back. (He stands.)

TONY (pulling him back down). Sit down, Mickey. We're all in this together.

MICKEY (to TONY). Shakespeare?

FRAN. You'll make a marvelous Falstaff, Mickey.

MICKEY. Falstaff? I thought that was some kind of beer.

FRAN (handing out scripts). Now, here are copies of the scenes we'll be doing. I want you to take them home and read them. Feel the power of the language - - the imagery, the phrasing. And sense the strength of the characters - - the vitality of these people who have lived in literature for more than three hundred years. Tomorrow, after school, we'll meet back here and assign parts, then set up our rehearsal schedule. In the meantime, I want you to - - well, figuratively at least - - go home and shake hands with Shakespeare.

(The lights dim on the stage area as ALL begin to leave. Entering from D R, or D L, is MRS. FREDRICKS, Sherrie's mother, carrying a plate of cookies which she sets on a table. The lights come up on the area which is the "kitchen" of the Fredricks' house.)

MRS. FREDRICKS. Shakespeare! I can't stand the man.

(SHERRIE enters, either directly from the "stage" or from offstage, if she left with the others.)

SHERRIE. Mom - - if I'm going to be an actress, maybe it won't hurt for me to . . .

MRS. FREDRICKS. Musical comedy. That's what'll take us to Broadway, baby. Check *Variety* for goodness' sake. Musical comedy, musical comedy, musical comedy! Nobody does Shakespeare any more. You should be doing Fanny Brice in "Funny Girl." I'm going to call that teacher.

SHERRIE. Mom, no.

MRS. FREDRICKS. Don't tell me the other kids want to do Shakespeare.

SHERRIE. Well, no. But, please Mom - - I don't want to get off on the wrong foot with Miss Caldwell.

MRS. FREDRICKS. She's the one on the wrong foot. Does she know you did "Mame" last year and "Hello, Dolly" the year before that and got a standing ovation every night?

SHERRIE. She knows we've done musicals. But, well - - Mrs. Stockton let her choose the show, so there's nothing we can do.

MRS. FREDRICKS. I knew that drama program was in trouble the day Mr. Norton left. That man was a doll.

SHERRIE. Was he a doll because he let us do whatever we wanted? And, Mom, he wasn't a great teacher.

MRS. FREDRICKS. I thought you liked him.

SHERRIE. I loved him. Everybody did. But I just think we should give the new person a chance, that's all. Look - - I've got some homework. I'll be up in my room. (She starts to go.) Did you ever study neutrons and protons?

MRS. FREDRICKS (preoccupied, as she eats a cookie). Back during the dark ages. I think the main source of protons is meat. I'll help you later. (SHERRIE leaves.) What kind of people are they hiring these days? I've got to call that woman. Shakespeare! I don't even think he's alive any more.

(MRS. FREDRICKS leaves, taking the cookies. The scene changes as MR. OVERMIRE, Tim's father, enters wearing an athletic warm-up outfit. He sits in a chair in his "living-room" as he puts on a pair of sneakers.)

MR. OVERMIRE. Tim!

TIM (offstage). Yeah, Dad?

MR. OVERMIRE. Let's get ready and go to the "Y."

(TIM enters.)

TIM. I've got a little studying to do. Maybe I'd better stay home tonight.

MR. OVERMIRE. Tackle the homework when we get back. You've gotta get ready for basketball practice next week.

You're gonna make the varsity this year, Tim. Not just J.V.

TIM. Dad - - there's a lot of competition.

MR. OVERMIRE (playfully tussling with TIM). You call it competition. I call it challenge. Come on. We won't be long - - some weights, a few laps, and fifteen minutes of one-on-one.

TIM (not enthusiastic). Okay.

MR. OVERMIRE. Hey - - I've got a surprise for you. If you promise to drive real careful, I'll let you take the car to basketball practice every night.

TIM (brightening, thinking). Thanks, Dad. Yeah, thanks.

(TIM and MR. OVERMIRE leave as the scene shifts to the "office" of the principal, MRS. STOCKTON, where she and FRAN sit.)

MRS. STOCKTON (writing on a form). "Maintenance of class discipline" - - very good. "Use of instructional materials" - - excellent. And, "Execution of non-teaching assignments" - - excellent - - despite the fact that the milk deliverers went on strike the week you had lunchroom duty. (They laugh.)

FRAN. The next time, I'll make sure we have cows in the kitchen.

MRS. STOCKTON. Fran - - your first monthly evaluation is top-notch. I think you're going to make us a fine teacher.

FRAN. Thank you very much. I just wish the students liked me as much as the principal.

MRS. STOCKTON. They will - - in time. Look - - you maintain discipline and you make them work. They'll get used to it.

FRAN. I get the feeling Mr. Norton was a very well-liked teacher.

MRS. STOCKTON. Very. For him, school was not a six-period day but a six-act play. He was loads of fun, a friend to all, and - - pardon my unprofessionalism - - a very lax teacher.

FRAN. I guess it's easier being easy than hard.

MRS. STOCKTON. Yes. Fortunately, it doesn't happen too much in this business.

FRAN. If I may change the subject . . . (A brief pause.) Do you think my play selection was - - well - - was a good one?

MRS. STOCKTON (after a moment). No.

FRAN. Then why didn't you . . . ?

MRS. STOCKTON. That's not my style, and I think you know it. Look - - I may be wrong - - I hope I am - - but if you're wrong, I want experience - - not the principal - - to point it out.

FRAN. They've done nothing but frothy musicals and light comedies for years. They've never met the masters like Sophocles, Moliere, even O'Neill. They have no idea of the great roles in theatre - - Oedipus, Antigone. They wouldn't know Shakespeare's Puck from a hockey puck.

MRS. STOCKTON. Neither would I. What's a hockey puck? (They laugh.)

FRAN. I just want them doing something more substantial than "Aaron Slick from Punkin Creek."

MRS. STOCKTON. Even Mr. Norton didn't do that one. Look, Fran - - don't get me wrong. I want our students exposed to good solid drama. Your strong background in Educational Theatre is one of the main reasons I hired you. I just feel that going directly from schlock to Shakespeare may be a little too abrupt. But perhaps not. I'm eager to see how it works out.

FRAN. Have you gotten any flack over my choice?

MRS. STOCKTON. No matter what you choose, there's always going to be some . . .

FRAN. Please be honest. I can take it. I've even had a phone call or two myself.

MRS. STOCKTON. Well - - a couple of people on the Board of Education . . .

FRAN. Oh, no - - Board members. Don't they want our programs upgraded?

MRS. STOCKTON. Yes - - but you have to remember, it's the visible things by which our school is known. Our prestige lies in our test scores, success of the ball teams, and the full houses at our plays and musicals.

FRAN. They don't think Shakespeare will draw?

MRS. STOCKTON. They're surprised you even drew enough actors. They can't believe the cast hasn't revolted yet.

FRAN. But they're good kids. I know they're not crazy about Shakespeare, but they're learning something.

MRS. STOCKTON. Good. That's precisely why we're here. (Looking at her watch.) Huh - oh - 9:25. Who's next? (Checking a list.) Mr. Summers. Now, how do I evaluate a basketball coach. Oh, well - - I've been doing it for twenty-one years.